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Soviet Shadows Over SALT

If President Carter wins reelection, his Administration will resume efforts to win Senate ratification of the SALT II treaty, and talks will begin with the Russians looking toward a follow-up agreement limiting the deployment of medium-range missiles in Europe.

Preparatory moves are under way already. Arms control undoubtedly will be touched on in Secretary of State Muskie's meeting today with Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko in New York. Next month U.S. and Soviet representatives will sit down for a preliminary effort to define the issues separating the two sides.

The second strategic arms limitation treaty, known as SALT II, was signed last year, but the question of ratification by the U.S. Senate was laid aside when the Russians invaded Afghanistan. Washington has pledged to abide by its terms, however, and the Kremlin has indicated that it will do likewise—at least until next year.

Considering that the Russians are still in Afghanistan, cranking the strategic arms limitation process up again will be difficult at best. Unfortunately, Moscow has made the task even harder by actions that appear to violate the spirit, and in some cases the letter, not only of the still-pending SALT II treaty but also of the 1972 SALT I agreements. For example:

—The 1972 treaty limiting the deployment of antiballistic missile systems, or ABMs, specifically prohibits the testing of air defense radars for use against strategic missiles. According to leaks from U.S. intelligence officials, the Soviets have conducted such tests in recent weeks.

—In routinely monitoring each other's missile tests, the United States and the Soviet Union lean heavily on the interception of telemetered test data. Encoding such data violates the spirit of

SALT I, and the plain words of SALT II, if the effect is to prevent the verification of missile performance by the other side. But, when a new submarine-launched missile was tested on the White Sea, 80% of the telemetry data were encoded.

Although this country's B-52 bombers are counted as strategic-delivery systems by SALT II, and thus subject to the ceilings imposed by the treaty, the Soviet Backfire bomber was exempted on grounds that it is not a strategic bomber. But the Russians are reported to have launched cruise missiles from the Backfire in test flights in seeming violation of Soviet commitments not to upgrade the bomber to strategic capabilities.

—In early September, the Soviets tested their ability to fire SS-18 intercontinental ballistic missiles from their silos and reload. Potentially, such action strikes at the very fabric of SALT limits on strategic nuclear missiles, which assume one missile per silo.

—Meanwhile, U.S. experts are described as 95% certain that a nuclear device set off by the Russians in a recent underground test had a yield of 300 to 400 kilotons—far in excess of the 150-kiloton ceiling set by the test ban treaty.

So far, the Administration appears to be taking a calm view of the suspect Soviet actions. One official, for example, observed that the Soviets' tinkering around with an SS-18 reload capability isn't much to worry about as long as it takes them two to five days to load the second round. And perhaps he is right.

The fact remains, though, that lack of trust is one of the greatest obstacles to effective strategic arms control agreements. When the Soviets feed that distrust by bending or breaking the terms of agreements that supposedly were negotiated in good faith, they endanger the whole process. □